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Exposure to Evidence of White Privilege and Perceptions of Hardships Among White UK Residents

Alexandra Murdoch¹ · Kareena McAloney-Kocaman¹

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Abstract

Research suggests that when confronted with evidence of privileged status White people will act to mitigate this evidence by reporting greater levels of personal hardships. There is little research exploring white privilege, or its consequences, in the UK, despite playing host to a diverse, multi-racial population. In the current study, 148 White individuals participated in an online experiment of the impact of exposure to evidence of White privilege. Individuals exposed to evidence of white privilege reported lower perceived personal privilege and greater personal life hardships, than those in the non-exposure condition. Exposure to hardships and belief in White privilege were independently related to reports of hardships but not when belief in personal privilege was considered. Findings suggest that exposure to evidence of White privilege may result in majority group members over-reporting personal hardship, but this may be lessened where personal privilege can be made salient.

Keywords White privilege · Hardships · Racism

Introduction

There has been growing attention to the antecedents of racist attitudes among ethnic majority groups, most notably white individuals and groups (Biernat and Crandall 1999; Dovidio and Gaertner 1986; Kluegel and Smith 1982; Stephan and Stephan 2000); as white people have both in the past (Farley and Allen 1987; Killian 1990; Sidanius and Pratto 1999) and present (Brooks 2015; Lerman 2017; Peterson et al. 2017) been at an advantage over Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) individuals on indicators of both wealth and social status. White privilege has been defined as the ‘unearned benefits and advantages’ that are handed out to white people as a result of a system that is ‘normed and standardized on White-European values, with most of the structures, policies and practices of the institutions being situated in such a manner as to pave the road for white individuals while creating obstacles for other groups’ (Sue 2003, p. 138).

It has been suggested that for white individuals, in-group bias is a reflection of cultural racism and centred around ideas and images that emphasise whiteness (Williams and

Mohammed 2013) and this has is supported by findings that white Americans have shown preferences for other white Americans both in a historical context and within contemporary American society (Duckitt and Sibley 2010). In addressing bias towards BAME outgroups, past research indicates that interventions designed to target racial discrimination and prejudice have low levels of effectiveness (Hite and McDonald 2006; Kalev et al. 2006; Stewart et al. 2003). In fact, there is some evidence that while such interventions can increase awareness of discrimination and privilege, but fail to influence attitudes and behaviours (Case 2007).

Of particular interest within the literature is a growing body of research investigating the impact of exposure to evidence of privileged status on attitudes and behaviours, which documents mixed reports as to the consequences of exposure to advantage status. A number of studies have reported positive effects, including links among exposure to increases in feelings of collective guilt amongst majority group members (e.g. Branscombe et al. 2002; Powell et al. 2005), and consequently to improved attitudes towards the disadvantaged outgroups. While in other studies negative attitudes to minority group members have become more prevalent or consolidated (e.g. Branscombe 2004).

Explanations for changes in attitudes on exposure to privilege have often focused on what has been termed ‘white fragility’ (DiAngelo 2011), whereby white individuals, as

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majority group members experience stress as a consequence of challenges to the racial status quo, and result in the activation of greater prejudice and discrimination towards the minority group as a defensive mechanism. For example, Todd et al. (2010) reported prejudiced attitudes towards Latino students held by White students, increased during the course of a semester as a result of being confronted with evidence of white privilege (Todd et al. 2010).

Phillips and Lowery (2015) have reported that exposure to privilege can also result in the majority individual reframing their own experience relative to that of the majority group. They have reported that when white American individuals were exposed to evidence of white privilege, they reported greater levels of personal hardship. This suggests that privileged individuals may respond to evidence of their group privilege by emphasising personal hardship in order to mitigate the extent to which they feel undeserving of that privilege, or to distance themselves from that elevated status on an individual level. Phillips and Lowery (2015) further extended their work to investigate the distinction between personal privilege and group level white privilege, specifically in relation to support for policies designed to redress prejudice and discrimination. Reporting a path model from evidence of privilege to support for discrimination targeting policies with personal hardships and belief in personal privilege as intermediate steps.

While a number of studies explored white privilege and white fragility (Bonds and Inwood 2016; Kwate and Goodman 2014; McConnell and Todd 2015; Nkomo and Ariss 2014), the vast majority have been within the US context, resulting in a substantial lack of research regarding racism and racial bias in the United Kingdom, particularly regarding white privilege. Analysis of British national identity beliefs has shown a steep drop in the importance associated with ‘Whiteness’ as well as British ancestry being a marker of ‘being British’ among individuals born since the increases in mass immigration to the United Kingdom began (Tilley et al. 2004). Yet statistics suggest that racism continues to be prevalent in the everyday lives of BAME residents in the UK (Phillips 2006). White EU migrants that come to the United Kingdom experience hostility and discrimination but the levels experienced by Black African migrants is significantly higher and systemic (Kingston et al. 2015). For example, Black British individuals are twice as likely to be charged for possession of drugs, despite lower rates of drug use (Eddo-Lodge 2017). Moreover, consistently within the literature white people attribute the disparities that BAME people experience to their own choices; e.g. that BAME individuals have a higher rate of arrest and incarceration because they commit more serious crimes more often than white individuals (Brown et al. 2003; Doane and Bonilla-Silva 2003), supporting the assertion that white Privilege is a relevant phenomenon in the UK (Rollock 2017).

This current study aimed to explore the impact of exposure to evidence of white privilege among white individuals resident in the UK on reports of personal hardship and belief in privilege, and to further investigate the association of belief in privilege with personal hardships. It is expected that individuals exposed to evidence of privileged white status will report greater hardships, have lower beliefs in their personal privilege and lower beliefs in white Privilege that individuals not exposed to this evidence. It is also expected that belief in white privilege, belief in personal privilege and exposure to privilege will independently influence reports of hardships.

Method

Participants

A priori power calculations were performed in G*Power prior to recruitment suggesting an appropriately powered sample for the study of approximately 120 participants (Faul et al. 2009). 148 individuals (51% female) responded to the online advert and selected one of two advertised links. Each link directed to a different version of the questionnaire, with slightly more individuals (53%) completing the exposure to privilege condition questionnaire than the no exposure condition questionnaire. The participants ranged in age range from 18–77 years, with a mean age of 29.39 years (SD 13.25). All participants reported being White-British (or Scottish, Welsh, Northern-Irish or English), and lived in the United Kingdom in response to the eligibility check items.

Materials

Participants were asked to provide basic demographic information including age, gender, and as a check for eligibility where asked to confirm that they were white, resident in the UK, and identified as British, or one of the constituent UK nationalities (i.e. Scottish, Welsh, Northern-Irish, English).

Exposure to White Privilege

Participants in the exposure condition were presented with a short paragraph adapted from the work of Peggy McIntosh (1988), which included 10 statements of white privilege (Please see Appendix 1).

Belief in White Privilege

Five items assessed belief in white privilege, adapted from the work of Swim and Miller (1999), each responded to on a scale of 1 (Strongly Agree) to 7 (Strongly Disagree). Items were then reverse scored for ease of interpretation

and averaged so that higher scores indicated higher belief in white privilege. Phillips and Lowery (2015) reported this measure to be highly reliable ($\alpha=0.93$), and with the current sample the measure also had excellent reliability ($\alpha=0.91$).

Personal Hardship

Personal hardship was assessed with four items (Phillips and Lowery 2015), responded to on a scale of 1 (Strongly Agree) to 7 (Strongly Disagree). All items were then reverse scored and averaged with higher scores indicated higher personal hardship. In Phillips and Lowery's (2015) study the scale had good reliability reliable ($\alpha=0.84$), and in the current study demonstrated excellent reliability ($\alpha=0.90$).

Belief in Personal Privilege

Three items were included to assess belief in personal privilege, (Phillips and Lowery 2015), responded to on a scale of 1 (Strongly Agree) to 7 (Strongly Disagree). All Items were then reverse scored and summed with higher scores reflecting greater belief in personal privilege. Phillips and Lowery (2015) reported that this scale was reliable ($\alpha=0.84$), and it demonstrated comparable reliability in the current study ($\alpha=0.86$).

Procedure

The study received ethical approval from the Glasgow Caledonian University School of Health and Life Sciences ethics committee. Participants were recruited via online adverts posted through Facebook which invited them to participate in a study of life experiences of white people in the UK. Potential participants were invited to follow one of two links to the online survey, labelled 'Link 1' and 'Link 2'. Link 1 directed participants to the experimental condition where they were presented with the stimuli material evidencing White privilege, before completing the measures of belief in white privilege, belief in personal privilege and personal hardships. Link 2 directed participants to the control condition where they were presented with identical measures but were not exposed to the evidence of white privilege stimuli. Data were collected over a two-week period in February

2018. All data were exported into SPSS 23 for analysis. In order to investigate the influence of exposure on the three outcome measures (hardship, personal privilege beliefs and white privilege beliefs), independent samples *t* tests were performed. A hierarchical multiple linear regression model was estimated to investigate the independent influences of exposure to white privilege, personal privilege beliefs and white privilege beliefs on hardships.

Results

Initial comparisons of the experimental and control group were made to identify if the participants differed demographically. There was a slightly higher proportion of female participants in the exposure to White Privilege group (55% in comparison to 46%) however a Chi square test indicated no significant differences here ($\chi^2_{(1)} = 1.122$, $p = 0.289$). There were no significant difference in the mean age across groups ($M_{(\text{privilege})} = 28.99$, $SD = 12.925$, $M_{(\text{control})} = 29.96$, $SD = 13.74$, $t(145) = -0.441$, $p = 0.660$).

As can be seen in Table 1 those exposed to evidence of white privilege had higher hardships scores, lower beliefs in their own personal privilege and lower beliefs in white privilege. A series of independent samples *t* tests indicated significant differences in hardship scores and belief in personal privilege scores across exposure conditions, but not for belief in White privilege (Table 2).

Comparison of hardships across gender groups revealed no significant differences in hardships reported by males and female, but females had significantly higher belief in white privilege and belief in personal privilege than male participants (see Table 2). Age was not significantly associated with personal hardships, belief in white privilege or belief in personal privilege. Belief in white privilege in was significantly positively correlated with belief in personal privilege ($r=0.724$, $df=147$, $p<0.001$). A hierarchical linear regression was estimated to investigate whether the reporting of life hardships is influenced by exposure to privilege, belief in personal privilege and belief in white privilege (Table 3). Gender was included as a control variable due to the significant gender differences found for both beliefs in privilege variables.

Table 1 Mean (SD) and independent samples *t* tests for beliefs in hardship, personal privilege and White privilege by exposure to privilege

	Hardships			Personal privilege			White privilege		
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i> (df)	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i> (df)	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i> (df)
Exposure to White privilege	16.19	6.28	2.364 (146)*	13.43	4.97	-2.468 (146)*	23.4	8.64	90.535 (146)
No exposure	13.7	6.45		15.4	4.83		24.2	8.29	

* $p < 0.05$

Table 2 *T* tests of differences by gender group, correlations with age and among the dependent variables

Independent samples <i>t</i> tests	Hardships		Belief in white privilege		Belief in personal privilege	
	<i>M</i> (SD)	<i>t</i> (df)	<i>M</i> (SD)	<i>t</i> (df)	<i>M</i> (SD)	<i>t</i> (df)
Female	3.60(1.53)	− 1.17 (145)	6.72 (1.67)	4.97 (131.9)***	5.16 (1.32)	2.84 (126.7)**
Male	3.91 (1.70)		5.10 (2.22)		4.39 (1.89)	
Correlations (<i>N</i> =147)						
Age	− 0.111		− 0.101		− 0.152	
Hardships	−					
Belief in White privilege	− 0.236 (147)**		−			
Belief in personal privilege	0.725***		− 0.390***		−	

Table 3 Hierarchical linear regression model of hardship beliefs by exposure to White privilege and belief in personal privilege

	Standardized beta			
	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3	Step 4
Male gender	0.115	0.030	0.025	0.045
Exposure to privilege	− 0.263*	0.191*	0.128	− 121
Perceptions of White privilege		− 0.215**		0.092
Perceptions of personal privilege			− 0.359***	− 0.423***
<i>R</i> ²	0.05	0.09	0.16	0.17

p* < 0.05; *p* < 0.01; ****p* < 0.001

Step 1 the influence of exposure to privilege on belief in hardships was estimated while controlling for gender, resulting in a significant model ($F(2, 144) = 3.918, p < 0.05$) which accounted for just 5% of the variance in reported personal hardships. As expected from the univariate analysis exposure to evidence of white privilege resulted in greater reported hardships while controlling for the influence of gender which was not significantly associated with hardships. At a second step belief in White privilege was added to the model resulting in an increase in the variance explained ($R^2 = 0.09, \Delta = 0.04$), and model that was significant ($F(3, 143) = 4.821, p < 0.01$). Exposure to evidence of White Privilege was associated with greater reported hardships, with only a marginal decrease in the standardise beta co-efficient. Belief in white privilege was associated with lower reported hardships. At step 3, belief in white privilege was removed and belief in personal privilege was added resulting in a sizeable increase in the variance explained in comparison to model 1 ($R^2 = 0.15, \Delta = 0.10$). Again the model was significant ($F(3, 143) = 9.613, p < 0.001$). In this step the effect of exposure became non-significant but belief in white privilege was significantly associated with lower reporting of personal hardships, suggesting the impact of exposure on hardships is mediated by belief in personal privilege. As a final step both belief in personal and belief in white privilege were include in the model, resulting in an marginal increase of 2% of explained variance in comparison to model 3, but an increase of 12% from model 1 which included exposure only. The model was significant at this step ($F(4, 142) = 7.343,$

$p < 0.001$). At this step neither exposure to evidence of privilege or belief in white privilege were significantly associated with hardships, but greater belief in personal privilege was significantly associated with decreased reports of hardships. This again supports the suggestion that beliefs in personal privilege can act to mediate the relationship between exposure to white privilege and reporting of hardships.

The results of this study therefore support the assertion that exposure to evidence of white privilege is associated with greater reporting of hardships and lower beliefs in personal privilege, and further suggests that the associations of hardships with both exposure to evidence of privilege and belief in White privilege may be completely mediated by beliefs in personal privilege beliefs.

Discussion

This study aimed to explore the relationship between exposure to evidence of white privilege and the reporting of life hardships, belief in white privilege and belief in personal privilege. The results presented here are consistent with those of Phillips and Lowery (2015) in that evidence of privilege was related to reporting greater personal hardships, supporting suggestions of that this relationship may serve as a mechanism for majority group individuals to distance themselves from inequity between the groups, by denying that racial privilege personally affects their lives, as opposed to denying that white Privilege exists altogether. Reporting

an increased number of life hardships as a reaction to the presentation of evidence of racial privilege may allow individuals to deny with confidence the extent of white privilege to their own lives. However, exposure to evidence of racial privilege makes it difficult for white individuals to plausibly deny the racial inequity that is present in society at a group level (Knowles and Lowery 2012), which is consistent with the lack of relationship between exposure and belief in white privilege in this study. Furthermore, belief in personal privilege was lower among those exposed to evidence of privilege which further strengthens the argument that such responses may be attributable to a motivated response to threat to the self (Hornsey et al. 2003; Tajfel and Turner 1986; Turner and Brown 1978). This study therefore suggests that claiming more life hardships can serve to help deny the presence of white privilege in one's personal life, despite life hardships not being relevant to white privilege as a general construct.

Phillips and Lowery (2015) reported that this belief can translate into real-life situations such as support (or lack of) for redistributive policies that are designed to alleviate group inequity (Bryan et al. 2009; Savani and Rattan 2012). Therefore, it is possible that the individuals who have increased claims of hardships and believe that they have not personally benefitted from privilege may show decreased support for policies that are being implemented to combat inequity, although testing such a link was beyond the scope of this paper.

It is also possible that perceived threat to racial hierarchy within society from the evidencing of inequity and privilege, could act to elevate claims of hardship. Conceptualised as 'fear of a black planet' (Eddo-Lodge 2017), this reflects fear among majority group members that that individuals who have experienced prejudice may reverse the norm and retaliate. It is plausible from this perspective that increased claims of hardship, and the absence of personal privilege could serve as a self-affirmation mechanism that an individual is an exception to the privileged majority (Knowles and Lowery 2012); as well as serving to maintain the material benefits that are concomitant with racial privilege.

Further research to disentangle the mechanisms by which reports of hardships increase in response to exposure to evidence of privilege is warranted, particularly with the UK context. However, as noted the results produced by this study suggest that white people are capable of differentiating between group privilege and personal privilege. In Phillips and Lowery (2015) it was thought that belief in white privilege on a group level was a prerequisite to believing that white privilege extends to oneself. The findings presented here indicate that beliefs in one's own personal privilege can in fact serve to mitigate the influence of beliefs in white privilege on reporting of hardships, and as such is an area for further development in interventions which aim to reduce

discrimination and racism, by emphasising personal privilege among majority group members rather than in-group privilege. This is a useful area for further research in this field, particularly within the UK, particularly given the consistent presence of racism in the lives of BAME individuals (Phillips 2006), and the increasingly hostile environment arising from the political decision to exit the European Union (Burnett 2017). Understanding how white British individuals relate to the experiences of non-white individuals living in the UK, both as British citizens and as migrants, can help inform interventions to improve both attitudes and behaviours towards racial minority group members.

Limitations of this study, which are worthy of note include the self-randomising nature of the study. Participants had the opportunity to choose which survey condition to complete as the website links to the 'white privilege' and 'no privilege' survey conditions were made available to all participants. As the study was conducted online, it is not possible to track whether participants viewed both conditions before choosing which to respond to, however all responses were screened rigorously to identify and remove any duplication of responses (i.e. participants completing both conditions). Additionally, demographic details were restricted to age and gender which limits the ability to make statements on the representativeness of the sample to the wider white UK population. The relatively low mean age, relative to the maximum age reported, suggested that the sample is over represented by younger adults, however this is broadly in keeping with the age distribution of the wider population; as is the higher proportion of females in the sample (Census 2011).

The current research builds on the research of Phillips and Lowery (2015), to explore the consequences of exposure to White Privilege within a UK string. It has demonstrated that white British individuals react in similar ways to that reported of White Americans when exposed to evidence that they experience benefits from racial privilege; they are willing to accept that white privilege on a group level does exist, but this appears to impact on self-reported perceptions about their personal lives, which may serve to deny the systemic advantages that have helped them in life. This represents, to the author's knowledge, a first attempt to explore the associations between racially based privilege and attitudes and beliefs in the UK context. Further research is warranted to more fully investigate the extent and nature of these relationships and to explore the impact on anti-discriminatory efforts. In order to appropriately address discrimination, it is important not only to understand the underprivileged, but understand the privileged as well (Kendall 2006). The study's results would suggest that efforts to reduce racial/ethnic privilege must not only focus on educating unknowing group members about their racial privilege, but efforts must also be made on reducing the feelings of threat that

are accompanied with these new realisations (Phillips and Lowery 2015). In particular, emphasising personal privilege among majority group individuals may be a useful route to decreasing racism and discrimination by mitigating the influence of responses to White privilege exposure on self-reported hardships.

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Appendix 1: White Privilege Statements for Exposure Condition

White privilege was described by McIntosh (1988) as an ‘invisible knapsack’ as many white people do not realise the various ways that White Privilege affects their everyday life. The following are statements describing white privilege

When I am told about our natural heritage or about ‘civilization’ I am shown that people of my colour made it what it is.

I can be sure that my children will be given the curricular materials that testify to the existence of their race.

Whether I use checks, credit cards or cash, I can count on my skin colour to not work against the appearance of my financial reliability.

I can swear, or wear second hand clothes, or not answer letters without having people attribute those choices to the bad morals, poverty or illiteracy of my race.

I can do well in a challenging situation without being called a credit to my race.

I am never asked to speak for all the people of my racial group.

I can criticize our government and talk about how much I fear its policies and behaviour without being seen as a cultural outsider.

If the traffic police pull me over, I can be sure I haven’t been singled out because of my race.

I can go home from most meetings of organizations I belong to feeling somewhat tied in, rather than isolated, out of place, outnumbered, unheard, held at a distance, or feared.

I can take job without having co-workers on the job suspect that I got it because of my race.

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